

OPINION

for the PHD dissertation

The influence of group affiliation on the life prospects of young people of Bulgarian and Roma origin

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For awarding the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in the field of higher education 3. Social, economic and legal sciences; professional field 3.1. Sociology, anthropology and cultural sciences; doctoral program Sociology

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1. Presentation of the dissertation.

Formal characteristics of the dissertation: The doctoral thesis has a total volume of 426 standard pages and consists of an introduction, a six-part presentation, a conclusion, a bibliography and three appendices. The bibliography includes 179 titles in Bulgarian, English, German, Russian and Hungarian. The publications required for the defense of this dissertation are three, in renowned academic journals, but the author has many other publications, dealing primarily with psychological and health aspects of behavioral attitudes. I have not found plagiarism in the doctoral thesis. The submitted documents and the dissertation meet all formal conditions for defense. The abstract presents the thesis correctly.

The first two parts of the dissertation are theoretical, the first one concerns views and research on the constitution of youth as a group, and the second - issues related to the description of the Roma community. This second part deals with the conceptualization of a minority; marginalization of groups in the post-industrial city and the difference between new forms of

urban marginality such as ghetto, communal ghetto, hyperghetto, including the difference between African-American ghettos in the US and working class suburbs in Western Europe, for example in Paris, the so called "Red Belt"; description of the Roma community in Bulgaria and specifically of the "Faculty" neighborhood in Sofia, the object of the study. This part contains a very interesting study, based on an observation of the "Faculty" neighborhood, mapping the different "neighborhoods" in it in a comparative plan - 2002 and 2017. For me, this is one of the most interesting parts of the dissertation, which, combined with the data from other studies, shows the difficulty of the "Faculty" neighborhood to fit into the forms of ghettoization described in the previous chapter - the neighborhood is a hybrid between community, ghetto, hyperghetto. The following two parts present the goals and methods of research of two groups of young people / 15-25 years old / - Roma living in the "Faculty" neighborhood and Bulgarians from Sofia. The last two parts are devoted to the analysis of the results.

An achievement of the study is that, in addition to comparing the two groups of young people, it also allows for tracking the generational change - it was conducted in 2002 and 2017, and the analysis constantly oscillates between the two groups and between the two periods. The study includes five different blocks of questions, in addition to demographic one, concerning: life prospects; the feeling of fatalism; experience of positive/negative emotions related to group affiliation; positive and negative experience in contact with representatives of one's own and the other (Bulgarian and Roma) ethnic groups; finally, a questionnaire for ethnic stereotypes (the analysis of the data from this questionnaire is in Appendix 2). These questionnaires presuppose five different studies, but the PhD student combines them in one analytical text in the last two parts, because she is looking for the relationship between the answers to the first four questionnaires listed above.

The data are many and varied, and the doctoral student constantly keeps both the comparison between the two groups and the comparison by periods, as well as the correlation between the different statements - this requires a lot of work, arousing admiration. For this reason, there is no way to comment on all of them, in the contribution review I will present the most important conclusions based on them.

2. Contributions

1. The PhD thesis undoubtedly has contributions related to the requirement for presenting *new knowledge*. It is unique in its double comparative aspect - between two different ethnic groups

and between two periods. No surprisingly, there is difference in the life prospects of the two ethnic groups, but special emphasis should be placed on the greater desire for migration among young Roma, compared to the young Bulgarians. A bit of surprise is the relatively low percentage of respondents in both groups, especially of Roma respondents, for whom marriage is not a priority in life prospects for the next 5 years. There are many more interesting data that are definitely a contribution to new knowledge, but here I will emphasize the most important conclusions that shed new light on the processes taking place among the young Roma generation in an urban neighborhood.

It is very important that the dissertation shows the heterogeneity of the group of Roma youth. In that group, during the 15-year period between the two studies, the percentage of those who deviate from traditional norms and become autonomous has increased. This is especially true for young people with secondary education and women - the data on young women are very interesting and deserve special attention. The author claims that some representatives of these two groups even intend to leave both the physical and mental territory of the community (p. 178). The study proves the role of higher education for the autonomy of the personality. It turns out that the traditional community of Roma living in a city neighborhood is disintegrating and representatives of the younger generation are starting to share the values of the Bulgarian youth. At first glance, it can be assumed that these processes will reduce the social distances between them and Bulgarian youth. This is not the case for two reasons. First, the meeting of the Roma young people with secondary education with Bulgarians "shows an increase in the experience of stigmatization ... Thus, placed in two environments in which they are perceived and treated as different, deviating from the norm, these young people are more sensitive to the experience of diversity in a negative aspect, i.e. to the alienating effect of the stigma." (p.189). This is because, secondly, "Over the years, the negative stereotypical perception of the Roma community has not changed significantly among Bulgarians." There is a generational change in some of the representatives of the Roma community in the direction of accepting modern values, but this change is not tied to overcoming the negative stigma on the part of Bulgarians to the Roma. This in turn leads to self-stigmatization on the part of Roma youth. This conclusion is very important contribution, because it contradicts the generally accepted view that the Roma do not change, that "their culture is unchangeable", that they "are such by nature", on the contrary, the study clearly registers a change at least in the study group. The problem is the opposite – it lies in the unchanging negative stereotypes and attitudes of Bulgarians towards them, which at best provoke a desire for migration among

the Roma. The author formulates the very important conclusion that "overcoming the self-marginalization by Roma youth without change in the representatives of the majority would hardly lead to full inclusion of Roma youth in the life of the larger society" / p. 197 /.

2. This final conclusion, as well as other data, directly leads to recommendations for public policies, although the author has not formulated them, but they follow from the text. I argue that the dissertation has *applied scientific contributions*. It shows that if we want integration, there must be a focus on policies towards the Bulgarian population, too (integration according to Maya Grekova is a bilateral meeting between the majority and minorities and requires efforts on both sides, the study proves this), aimed at overcoming negative stereotypes - educational, media, employment policies. The role of education is evident, so that, in addition to focusing on the desegregation process, which is difficult, the quality of education in segregated schools must increase sharply.

3. *Theoretical and methodological contributions*. I have already mentioned that the doctoral student describes a new, different type of urban marginality, which does not fit into the existing categories, but is a hybrid of them: the neighborhood has features of a communal ghetto, but the community is falling apart - there are big differences between rich and poor Roma, older and younger generation; it looks like hyperghetto, but has other characteristics, too; it develops as if in a positive direction, but the negative stereotypes towards it persist. I think this is an interesting theoretical direction in which the doctoral student could continue her work. The methodological contribution concerns the development and implementation of a structured questionnaire to measure attitudes towards fatalism and traditional values, based on the analysis of interviews with Roma youth and consistent with their language and views.

3. Critical remarks and questions.

The dissertation offers too much data that requires thinking. This, of course, is a plus, but the interpretation of so much data implies even more work than invested. In this sense, in view of a future book, I find it more useful to shorten some of the data in the name of a more serious interpretation of those that remain. Example: There is an interesting conclusion, based on data (among interviewed Bulgarian youths the percentage of admiring Bulgarians increases, the number of those in conflict with Bulgarians decreases, etc.), that in 2017 among young Bulgarians who believe that in Bulgaria they cannot realize all their plans for life, the number of those who had had negative intragroup experience had decreased significantly (p.174-175).

Curious data in itself. But what does this mean, what are the possible interpretations? That the respondents admire Bulgarians abroad? That the requirements for life plans have increased? That the social milieu does not affect the plans for life? There is probably no data to suggest the correct answer, but it is good to emphasize curious results and to hypothesize about them. Or, other example, what does the conclusion of p. 176 tell us: “The results show that among the young Roma from the “Faculty” neighborhood, for whom it is most important to find (any) job in 2017, the share of the experienced both negative and positive experiences with both Roma and Bulgarians is decreased”?

Of course, I must emphasize that the author interprets most of the data particularly interestingly in the summaries at the end of every part (chapter). What I am saying, in view of the readability of a future book that must be published, is to reduce a little the data that is given, at the expense of interpretations. For me personally, it would be more useful to have more tables, so for the reader will be easier to navigate the multitude of data. Sometimes, precisely because the numbers line up like the poplars in the song "Meeting" by the rock band “Crickets”, the subtle distinctions are lost and hardly necessary, for example in conclusions such as: "By almost 26% less are these young people from the "Faculty" neighborhood, who *trusted* Roma (from 77.6% in 2002 to 51.7% in 2017) and by 27.2% those who *trust* Roma (75.5% in 2002 and 48.3%) % in 2017), if at all this sentence is correct (it.m.). There are also some repetitions in the text, which should be removed in the book, for example related to the description of the European ghettos (pp. 61 -62 with pp. 72), as well as in some of the summaries.

The comparative data of the two groups on the attitudes towards the family are very interesting - among the Roma the autonomy towards the parents increases, while among the Bulgarians the process is opposite - the desire for support from the family increases, although the young people are autonomous in their decisions (pp. 180-183). Important results, but here the difference between the two groups and the different role of the family should be explained - while for Roma youth autonomy is an expression of individualization and undermining the traditional norms of the community, in the Bulgarian case, characterized by nuclear families, perhaps it is a return to a "Haven in a Heartless World" (Cr. Lasch), and is problematic whether this is an expression of re-traditionalization. The question is to what extent the understanding of the “family” is similar in both groups and whether the functions it performs are one and the same in those groups. If there are differences, then the statement "Even the sharing of the same values (means “community values” – r. m.) fails to ” (p.223) is wrong

- are the values really common? Here is the role of qualitative research to clarify understandings of values.

Everything written so far in no way diminishes my excellent impression of the presented dissertation, but rather aims to improve the readability and understanding of the data in the future book.

4. Personal impressions

I do not know the doctoral student personally. I have positive impressions of her from the presentation of parts of her thesis at the doctoral seminars. I have no conflict of interest with her.

5. Conclusion

What has been written so far leads to my definite conclusion that the dissertation is an important scientific work with significant contributions. I am voting for the award of the scientific and educational degree "Doctor" in the professional field 3.1. Sociology, anthropology and cultural sciences 11/05/01 (Sociology) to Radostina Borisova Antonova and I recommend the members of the scientific jury to make the same decision.

23.10.2021

Prof. Dr. Petya Kabakchieva